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Heidegger, Postmodern Theory and Deep Ecology

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The above title is from a chapter in the book *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* by Michael Zimmerman, University of California Press 1994. The last 28 pages of the chapter are headed "Heidegger, Naess, and Ontological Phenomenalism". My gestalt ontology is a sort of ontological realism in the sense that we have direct access to the contents of reality in our spontaneous experiences. These are not mere appearances or phenomena.

Zimmerman does not mention "the 8 points of the deep ecology movement", and that is all to the good because they are perhaps too often brought into the discussion. But it is of some importance to immediately observe that the questions the author painstakingly discusses all belong to "level 1 of the Apron Diagram". That is, they belong to the ultimate premises. At this level the supporters of the deep ecology movement recognize widely, in part incompatible views. The 8 points, constituting the second level, are proposed as expressions of what the supporters have in common on a fairly general and abstract plane. For instance that it is meaningful to do something for a living being's own sake, (cp. "inherent value"). One supporter may say he does not accept anything Heidegger seems to say on this level, or that he accepts everything. And Naess is only one of the 15 or 20 theorists of the movement. Deep ecology has never been, and will hopefully never be a philosophical sect.

Some of Zimmerman's formulations I feel need commenting.

"Conservation ecologists like Michael Soulé do seek to draw normative conclusions from their disciplines, but many scientists feel constrained to separate their academic research ("fact") from morality, politics, and their own original love for living nature." (P.122). Michael Soulé considers conservation biology a crisis science like AIDS research. It may be said to have normative premises. The sentence "What follows if we value positively and for its own sake the diversity and abundance of life on Earth?" contains a strategic "if", but the "we" does actually accept the valuation. During the hours of research they do not partake in politics, and they do not derive political and moral norms from research. But conclusions based on research may motivate norms. And a set of research conclusions plus a single norm may have a large field of derived practical consequences. In some senses spontaneous experiences may be said to contain inseparable factual and normative components. In verbalizations it is wise to keep the normative announcements without an "if" separate from purely declarative statements. A good habit in serious written discussions is to end the former with an exclamation mark. In that way it is easier for the reader to understand the intention of the writer.

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According to Zimmerman (and others) there are similarities between Heidegger's and my philosophical views, and he places me (too) centrally within the deep ecology movement. It is the latter point which perhaps makes it useful to look carefully at what Zimmerman says.

"The visual horizon on which objects appear is not produced by the subject;" instead, the "horizon is but the side facing us on an openness which surrounds us; an openness which is filled with views of the [self-showing, self-luminous] appearances of what to our re-presenting are objects." (P.123). Those who are not acquainted with Heidegger's strange terminology should not feel worried. It is part of the tradition to listen to his words and take seriously the associations we spontaneously experience. Zimmerman adds to the above sentences a piece of interpretation of Heidegger's sentences: "The self luminosity of things and the openness in which such luminosity occurs are not separate from one another; they constitute aspects of the same event."

There are interesting similarities to be noted:

"Naess says that the subject-object distinction is not primary. Further, he denies that there are primary qualities, essences, substances, or even 'things', if by the latter we mean solid, unchanging, isolated material objects. Things are useful constructs for dealing with constantly changing, internally related phenomena, which constitute 'experience'." (P.123). I trust that Zimmerman has understood what I have written in certain rather technical papers, but I cannot accept the way he tries to formulate what he understands. "Constructs" reminds me too much of postmodernism and suggests an activity on the part of us humans which is too pretentious. We do not construct things. We construct concepts of things - that is remarkable enough for me.

I say that in spontaneous experiences we have direct access to what is real. We experience some things as solid, fairly isolatable and closely related to others. But nothing absolutely isolatable etc. A crystal we may experience as small and beautiful, the "primary" quality of smallness, is not more real than the beauty, but certainly important socially and in action. In spontaneous experiences things appear without "effort", perhaps the Heideggerian terminology is helpful: phenomena are "self-luminous". But I like to talk about things or items rather than "phenomena" (ontological realism of sorts?).

"If interrelated phenomena lack substance, essence, or self-existence, as suggested by the Buddhist formula *sarvam dharmam nihsvabhavam*, there is no ultimate ontological gap between self and not-self, humanity and nature." (P.123). This sounds reasonable to me if we exchange "ultimate" for "ultimate and absolute". What we call common sense is roughly right in ontology as long as we talk loosely and with no philosophical pretensions. I do not feel that I am subjected to something as spectacular as an incessant play of phenomena. On the simple level of "the 8 points", I am sitting in a solid chair and there is no play going on. But if a graduate student of philosophy appears, I confirm, for instance, that I am a possibilist: we have absolutely no guarantee what will happen in the future. This is a kind of absolutism, but it is within the framework of professional philosophy with some, but not with important consequences for my life or general outlook.

What I am driving at is the unprofessional sense in which I use the expression "ultimate philosophical or religious views" when I say that supporters of the deep ecology movement are supposed to be moved or motivated in their environmental activism, in part, by such views. They have value priorities, outlook on their own lives, what they are and what they seek. They "problematize" various aspects of society in the light of their priorities. If they say they feel close to Buddhism with its teaching about greed and other phenomena of fairly concrete kinds, it need not imply philosophical knowledge or interest in the theoretical aspects of nirvana. Zimmerman opens his discourse about Heidegger, Naess and ontological phenomenism with this intricate philosophical announcement:

Just as Ecosophy T was influenced in part by the nondualism of Mahayana Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta, so Heidegger had a long interest in Western mysticism, as well as in Buddhism and

Taoism. This shared interest in nondualism brings deep ecology into proximity with two themes in Heidegger's thought. (P. 122).

Excellent, but it may make readers associate (1) too closely with the deep ecology movement and (2) associate too closely the important expression "philosophical or religious" in describing the relation of deep ecology to the ecology movement as a whole with contemporary professional (academic) philosophical debates.

Having expressed my slight uneasiness about the way he brings "deep ecology" into the discussion I shall continue here by meeting some of Zimmerman's views more squarely.

Philosophers have been a great source of inspiration in 2500 years. Mostly their sayings, especially those of great fame, can be interpreted in interesting, highly different ways. Those who accept with eagerness the sayings, or some of the sayings, tend to believe that their interpretation is the "correct" one, or at least they write as if they hold that belief. If one is not primarily interested in history, I find it better to talk about texts as sources of inspiration. In his article Zimmerman quotes from texts by Heidegger and Derrida. It is a valuable thing to consider those texts as possible sources of inspiration for supporters of the deep ecology movement who have strong philosophical interests. To my great surprise I find that parts or fragments of the texts written by Derrida may be such a source. Consider the following quotation from Zimmermann:

Deep ecologists agree with Derrida's deconstruction of anthropocentrism, however, they resist this deconstruction of nature, wilderness, and ecosphere, and they regard ecocentrism as a desirable alternative to anthropocentrism. For Derrida, however, ecological problems cannot be solved by turning the ecosystem into yet another metaphysical absolute, since doing so is motivated by the same control-impulse that animates all centrisms, including those responsible for social oppression. He argues that we never encounter nature either in itself or as a whole; instead, nature is a social phenomenon, whose meaning is always contested within particular, local discourses. (P.138).

The word "anthropocentrism" I take to express a sort of theory or a way of thinking (within ecophilosophy), but words like "nature", "culture", "vulture", and most others do not. It seems that Derrida guesses we use the term "ecosystem" as a near synonym to "nature", and that both words among deep ecology theorists are names for one or two metaphysical absolutes. How Derrida has found out that and what it means is not quite clear to me, but the seriousness of "turning something into a "centrism" - and metaphysical absolutes are elements of the class of centrisms - is motivated a "control-impulse". To this class belongs some or all those centrisms which are responsible for social oppressions. There is an escape from this demonic evil which has "generated crusades and political systems that has wreaked havoc for centuries." In the lamentable case of deep ecology it is important to realize that "nature is a social phenomenon". I have seen convincing arguments against the usual terminology within the ecological movement that every conception of nature is made within society. But I see no possible way from this to declaring nature to be socially created.

The views of Derrida cannot adequately be stated in such a few words, and his criteria for adequacy are probably different from mine, but some students who accept what they think Derrida basically means, also accept the 8 points of the deep ecology movement. Because of the richness of interpretations of assertions in postmodern philosophical literature, this is not very astonishing. One of my conclusions is (again) that the level 1 norms and descriptions from which the 8 points may be and actually are derived reveal a great richness. Why not try to derive the 8 points from a set of views which includes those we guess are expressed by Umberto Eco's following sentence:

... there is no Being that speaks. There is a language that speaks Being...Language comes first... Being is only an effect of meaning. Meaning is an effect of cultures. The cultural universe is a labyrinth. (Quotation from Zimmerman, p. 140).

But could we possibly derive the 8 points from texts which includes sentences like "reality is a text" or "Everything is a 'text'" (Derrida)? Why not? I guess Dave Foreman and others would feel uncomfortable to hear that "being human means existing within a linguistic play". (P.138). In seminars with academic philosophers who are classed as influenced by, and highly positive towards, Derrida, it is my experience that his sentences regularly can be transformed into more familiar ones. After all, the slogan to deconstruct is fairly general and is intended also to apply to postmodern texts when they seem to assert something. We could if we, like Derrida, define this text as an "openness without limits to the differential referral" and then define "differential referral" in certain ways.

Zimmerman belongs to those supporters of the deep ecology movement who seriously study and look for important help from the works of philosophers who most philosophically concerned supporters do not expect can be of much help. I belong to this majority but am grateful that Zimmerman continues his endeavors. I have asked the editors of Encyclopedia Britannica to give me a chance to revise my Heidegger article in the 14th edition of that work. When writing the article I considered the late works of Heidegger to belong rather to a new kind of poetry than to philosophy.

Radical versions of Kant's "Ding an sich" philosophy are still influential, especially in postmodernism, and will presumably continue to inspire people in the future. According to this doctrine whatever we say about nature, it does not apply to nature strictly in itself. There is an eternal ignoramus, a "we don't know" to be considered. From this it follows that humans as part of nature will never be known. We will never be able to say something about humans in themselves. But there is a world in itself, close to us, we can only conceive shadows of ourselves, features completely determined by our senses and our intellect. Today's prevalent version substitutes society for senses and intellect. Everything is socially determined. Interestingly enough social anthropologists who adopt some of the concepts of postmodern literature (Fredrik Barth and others) tend to "deconstruct" the idea of society, insisting that human interaction is much more complex than is usually thought in social anthropology. Strictly speaking there are no societies as usually defined in social anthropology.

Then I shall talk about something quite different:

Unhappily, all-embracing systems like that of Spinoza are taken to be dogmatic. Texts like those of Heidegger are taken more seriously. The expectation is that the creator or interpreter of such a system is rigid and does not easily change opinions. This is not a tenable generalization. Historically, philosophers have gone through stages of development whatever their kind of philosophy. Sextus Empiricus holds that Pyrrhonic sceptics had a certain tendency to develop into Heraclitans, turning into "dogmatism", believing to have found at least one truth.

Dogmatists have changed into sceptics.

Those who try to integrate their views about life and the cosmos do not necessarily show stagnation or ossification, not more than philosophers who focus on a small number of themes. Some start in young years with firm general views, but tend later to give them up or soften them. It is often said that they understand better the overwhelming complexity of what they try to bring into a kind of order, however tentatively. So they give up.

The importance of Spinoza and other systemsbuilders is that they present Lebens und Weltanschauungslehre at its best. I have recently lectured on this in Germany where they say they are still somewhat reluctant about L & W because of Hitler, or, because in Germany L & W is shown to be producing monstrous Anschauungen. I hope next century will not be so preoccupied with language, and philosophical research more than postmodern, small narratives and cultural conversations.

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